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WASHINGTON POST
24 February 1985

AN UNEASY PARTNER

First of Three Articles

Honduras Wary of U.S. Policy

Support for Nicaraguan Rebels, El Salvador Raises Concern

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The United States and Honduras have reached a crucial stage in their relations as the Reagan administration strives to keep pressure on Nicaragua's leftist government from Honduran bases and Honduran leaders grow wary of getting in too deep.

The Hondurans' hesitation, chiefly among military officers, has cast a shadow over U.S. policy in Central America, which has placed Honduras at the center of efforts against Nicaragua and leftist insurgents in El Salvador.

For the most part, the Reagan administration appears to be listening to new Honduran demands with half an ear, concerned more with how Honduras fits into U.S. goals in the region than with Honduras' own objectives.

This article examines the role of Honduras in U.S. policy. Subsequent articles Monday and Tuesday will

look at the country's importance to rebels fighting the Nicaraguan government and at the political process in Honduras.

When leftist Sandinistas took power in neighboring Nicaragua in 1979, and leftist guerrillas gained strength in El Salvador, official Washington scrambled to befriend neglected Honduras, rediscovering old alliances and forging new ones. Honduras, worried that it was the left's next target, was happy to oblige.

Honduras now is the staging area for U.S. military exercises and clandestine operations against Nicaragua. It is a rest-and-recreation stop, a training field, intelligence center and supply base.

About 1,300 U.S. military and 150 diplomatic personnel are stationed there, and the number grows to around 5,000 during the nearly nonstop military maneuvers. The exercises have cost the United States at least \$100 million, and further millions have gone

into housing, two radar stations, a field hospital and into building or improving eight airfields—most of it allegedly temporary construction for the exercises. There is also a U.S.-built Regional Military Training Center, which Washington hopes to make permanent.

An airfield at Aguacate in central Honduras, improved for what the administration said then was support for the Big Pine 2 exercise in 1983, has become the main base for anti-Sandinista airdrops to guerrillas in Nicaragua, according to a knowledgeable rebel official.

Another airfield, at Palmerola, northwest of Tegucigalpa, expanded with U.S. military construction funds, has become headquarters for a 1,200-man semipermanent U.S. military presence, including a field hospital and a U.S. air reconnaissance squadron that flies regular missions in support of Salvadoran Army troops.

Officially, relations between the United States and Honduras could hardly be warmer.

But Honduras, as it has for decades, wants to be more to the United States than a stationary aircraft carrier. In the words of one knowledgeable State Department analyst, Honduras is "squeaking in an effort to get some grease," asking for more economic and military aid, staking out some independent policies and demanding a written U.S. defense commitment.

The most dramatic demonstration of its new demands came last September, when Hondurans barred Salvadoran soldiers from the Regional Military Training Center set up with U.S. funds at Puerto Castilla on the Atlantic coast expressly to train Salvadorans without increasing the number of U.S. advisers in El Salvador. About 5,000 Salvadorans went through courses under U.S. trainers from June 1983 until Honduras, which has a longstanding border dispute with El Salvador, insisted that no more Salvadorans be trained there.

A ranking U.S. official in the Honduran capital of Tegucigalpa said agreement looks likely before the end of next month, when new U.S. money must be committed, to resume training Salvadorans under a compromise acceptable to the Honduran military command. Resolution of other demands also is probable in the long run, U.S. and Honduran sources said, because senior Honduran military officers share U.S. concern over the Sandinista government in Nicaragua and have become dependent on U.S. leadership and financial aid.

"If the United States stopped aid, I don't know how long the ammunition would last," said a Honduran who strongly opposes his government's extensive cooperation with U.S. policies. "It is a total dependency."

Honduran and U.S. sources with access to the military emphasized, for instance, that the government so far has done nothing to stop or scale down Big Pine 3, 11 weeks of joint military maneuvers that began Feb. 11 and are scheduled to involve up to 4,500 U.S. soldiers with M60 tanks and M113 armored personnel carriers.

But they added that the armed forces commander, Gen. Walter Lopez, appears resolved to halt or reduce Honduran support of anti-Sandinista guerrilla forces based here unless the U.S. Congress endorses administration policy by approving renewed CIA funding for the rebels.

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One Honduran source with access to Lopez said the commander personally has become determined to reduce or end Honduran support for the Nicaraguan rebels and he notified Nicaraguan President Daniel Ortega of his intention through a private channel. But another source explained that Lopez has not gained high-level support in the Army for his stand and said that the general complained to a recent visitor that he feels "alone" on this.

"There is a sector of the Honduran Army that feels its sovereignty and its dignity have been trampled, and they are determined to recover respect, both for themselves and for the country as a whole," said a Honduran analyst. "There is another sector that is just trying to get better conditions for Honduran cooperation with the United States."

Lopez has declined interview requests recently to explain the situation, following Honduran tradition that military matters fall outside the public domain.

The Reagan administration has not worked out what it would do if Honduras were lost as a base for Nicaraguan rebels and U.S. military maneuvers aimed at pressuring the Sandinistas, a U.S. official said. In that event, he said, there would be little choice but to adopt a "long-term containment policy" by building up the military and economic strength and political will of Nicaragua's neighbors. This would be difficult because Costa Rica, to the south, has a constitutional ban against a national army and Honduras, to the north, rests on a young and uncertain political system ill-equipped to support the weight of U.S. policy for the region.

"This is not Europe," the ranking diplomat added, referring to the containment policy directed against the Soviet Union after World War II.

Some of the administration's problems with Honduras, and in Central America generally, stem from its

execution of policies before making much effort to secure public or congressional support for them, he said.

The CIA sped into building up anti-Sandinista rebel forces here in 1982 and 1983, for example, on the basis of explanations to Congress that the purpose was to choke off arms supplies to Salvadoran guerrillas by direct action and by pressuring their Sandinista suppliers to "turn inward." According to a 1983 report from the House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence, administration officials only later said that the rebels would serve to "bring the Sandinistas to the bargaining table" and force them to hold elections.

President Reagan, expanding the latter argument in a press conference Thursday, said his objective was to remove the "present structure" of the Sandinista government or get it to "say uncle."

The response in Washington to Honduras' demands, beneath warmly receptive formalities, has been weary annoyance.

"They're already getting what they deserve. They're just seeing how far they can push it," the State Department analyst said.

The Hondurans pushed it too far last Jan. 18 for Robert C. McFarlane, President Reagan's national security adviser, who stalked out of a meeting during his visit to Tegucigalpa when Honduran officials insisted on a written promise of U.S. military support in the event of outside attack.

The Hondurans had told McFarlane that they trusted his word and the word of President Reagan, but they were worried that a future U.S. president "might not be as strong" and would fail to act in a crunch, according to one person who was present at the meeting.

They said they were worried about threats not only

from Nicaragua, but perhaps also from El Salvador. McFarlane "got a real earful," one Honduran said.

McFarlane said the 1947 Inter-American Treaty of Reciprocal Assistance, which considers an armed attack on one American state to be an attack on all, binds the Western Hemisphere together well enough and would suffer if there were bilateral agreements besides. He expressed annoyance that the president's word was not enough and left, the observers said.

But the Hondurans had made their point. "I wouldn't rule out a written statement of some kind now," a State Department official said.

U.S. attention to Honduran demands was focused by the barracks coup March 31 that ousted pro-American Gen. Gustavo Alvarez as chief of the armed forces and replaced him with Lopez, an officer much more skeptical of U.S. goals in the region. Lopez is at least co-equal in power with President Roberto Suazo Cordova.

The coup was unforeseen in Washington and was an acute embarrassment for the CIA, which reportedly had been so close to Alvarez that all its informants were ousted with him. Clearly, the U.S. Embassy was out of touch.

"That did it for [U.S. Ambassador John D.] Negroponte," said a State Department official who does not admire Negroponte. A staunch conservative his critics called "the proconsul" during his four years in Honduras, Negroponte is returning to Washington to become assistant secretary of state for oceans and environmental and scientific affairs.

Honduras asked for bilateral talks to redefine its overall relationship with the United States, and discussions began in August.

An influential Honduran, saying he reflected Lopez's

views, said Negroponte was typical of most U.S. diplomats in not trying to understand Honduras' desires except in the context of what Washington wants Honduras to do.

"That has to change," the Honduran said. "You think we don't have any options, but we do. We can talk to Nicaragua, too."

That statement is greeted with skepticism at the State Department. It is still policy bedrock there that the conservative, devoutly free-enterprise Honduran government may be somewhat divided on the surface, especially with an election pending, but that it is first and foremost terrified of Nicaragua and will do nearly anything to strengthen itself against any future Sandinista threat.

Several U.S. officials have voiced a judgment that Honduras has no choice but to remain part of U.S. policies in Central America. During a visit to Honduras last fall, U.S. and Honduran sources said, Gen. Paul Gorman, outgoing chief of the U.S. Southern Command, bluntly told complaining Honduran officers, including Lopez, "You can stay with us, or you can go with the Cubans."

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Hondurans admit their division and their worry, but insist that they must prepare for the day when the United States' attention wanes in the region and they are left to their own devices. Then, they argue, they will be threatened not only from Nicaragua but from El Salvador.

"We regard El Salvador as being as much of a threat to us as Nicaragua," said a senior Honduran political figure. "The Reagan administration doesn't understand that."

"If Nicaragua ever invades us, it will be an international problem immediately, and the U.S. or the Organization of American States or something will be on hand," reasoned a conservative Honduran businessman. "But if we have problems with El Salvador, it is only a local affair and we will get no help."

The famous "soccer war" between Honduras and El Salvador began in 1969 with escalating fistfights after a game. After a decade of tension, the countries agreed in 1979 to five years of direct talks on their disputed border, but the talks end this year, and no agreement is in sight.

Now the Hondurans see what used to be a shabby, corrupt Salvadoran Army becoming a formidable fighting force with U.S. aid. Convinced that El Salvador's leftist rebels will be eliminated one way or another eventually, the Hondurans worry that the Salvadoran colonels will turn their new strength toward them.

Several administration officials smiled at the thought. "That's a bit of hyperbole," one said.

L. Craig Johnstone, deputy assistant secretary of state for Central America and a key architect of U.S. policy in the region, said the Salvadoran issue is an example of the fact that Honduran officials raise more issues in public and with the media than they do with U.S. officials.

As another example, he cited recent published worries in Honduras over the future of the estimated 14,000 armed Nicaraguan rebels who have used U.S. aid and Honduran soil to mount attacks against the Sandinistas.

If Congress fails to provide the additional \$14 million that the Reagan administration wants for the program, these rebels would be broke, jobless, homeless and armed, posing a serious problem for Honduras. Officials already have charged that the rebels have murdered leftist Honduran politicians on behalf of rightist Honduran military officers whom the government says it is trying to curb. "We don't want to be another Lebanon," one officer said.

Johnstone said Honduras has "a legitimate beef" in complaining that it gets less aid than either Costa Rica or El Salvador while running equal or greater risks.

Since fiscal 1981, Costa Rica has received \$651.8 million in U.S. economic aid and El Salvador \$1.08 billion through fiscal 1985. By contrast, the United States has allocated \$519.6 million to Honduras, and much of that is still in the pipeline or held up in disputes with the State Department over reform measures, such as currency devaluation, that Honduras is reluctant to take.

After hearing Honduras' complaints and promising consideration, the Reagan administration proposed considerably less economic aid for fiscal 1986 than it gave Honduras this year: \$142.9 million as opposed to \$214.7 million.

"You can easily overdraw" Honduras' importance, Johnstone said. "It's a key, not *the* key, to our policy. It's no good to have Honduras if you lose El Salvador."

The State Department has taken a tough line on demanding economic reform in Honduras, particularly a devaluation or at least the creation of a parallel market with a realistic exchange rate. If there is no agreement by March 1, Honduras could lose \$72.5 million in fiscal 1984 economic aid. Another \$75 million is at stake in 1985 money.

All sides say they are hopeful that something can be worked out in all these disputes. As a senior administration official summed up the U.S. view, Hondurans have to be patient with the U.S. bureaucracy, especially when Honduran voices are divided and money is short.

"They're trying to pressure us in various ways, but their real position hasn't changed," a senior administration official said. "Neither has ours."

Next: Who wields power in Honduras